



## Decline and Fall of The Imaginary Dimension: Are We Moving Towards a Virtual and Fictitious Empire?

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### Abstract

**Background:** The role of the religious factor in psychic economy has called much attention in every WACP congress. Since WACP congress in London, pre-congresses have been entirely dedicated to this topic, which has now caught the attention of New York Congress' presidency as well. In the 21st century cultural proselytizing has replaced cultural borrowing. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the proliferating of religious sects and dogmatic beliefs rooted in institutionalized theism. Since their foundation as scientific disciplines, Transcultural Psychiatry and Cultural Psychiatry are in charge to deeply investigate this field of knowledge.

**Aims:** To mark off a subject suitable to scientific research and to timely clinical interventions by investigating the interplay between: A) extreme cultural beliefs, B) the psychological environment generated by them, B) how economical and geopolitical factors influence the shaping of different kinds of interhuman relationships, D) representation of A, B and C in clinical manifestations.

**Method:** The presentation develops the theoretical foundations on which WACP and CPRR were born, aimed to shift transcultural psychiatrists' attention not only towards "foreign people", but first and foremost towards our own culture, namely the holder of the predominant psychiatric parameters.

**Results:** Comparative observations resulting from field researches on Australian Desert Aborigines' beliefs and Christian Church's statements on specific miracles are reported.

**Discussion:** The purposes of the presentation are: to reassess the several notions of supernatural illustrated by considering religion and magic as analogous human survival techniques, and to partly illustrate how the process of implicitly making religion's and culture's origins overlap brings inevitably to the flattening of the entire field of ethnology on the one of religious ethnology.

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Among the great number of authors who have faced the topic of humankind and its imaginative capability, I have chosen to rely on the work of three famous historians of religion: J.P. Vernant (1982), Erik Dodds (1993) and Ernesto De Martino (1978). Their approach can be summarized as follows: «The inherited “psychological climate”, by defining the shared mental states that surround and affect the average member of a nation since infancy, has an overriding force in shaping identities and religious affiliations». Dodds in particular, when focusing on the characteristics of the inherited cultural conglomerate, reveals himself as a general psychopathologist by pointing out an important transition occurred in a precise moment in the history of Western culture: «The psychophysical unity had split in two not only in theory but also in practice. [...] This dichotomy naturally comes from classical Greece and it is the gift richest in consequences and perhaps most debatable among all the gifts that it has bestowed upon human culture» (Dodds, 1993).

The splitting of the psychophysical unit, in Dodds and De Martino’s view, lead to unexpected consequences: the split of the Ego, the detachment from the external world, and the emptying of the Self, which, as a result, had to be filled through the notion of God.

### **PHANTASIAI VERSUS PHASMA**

Vernant (1982), for his part, has masterfully described how the civilization of ancient Greece used to assess the apparition of different kinds of images on the conscious level.

In Ancient Greece the main imaginary classes were:

- the actor’s art of stimulating images (EIDOLON DEMIOURGIA or PHANTASIAI)
- the images contained in dreams (ONAR)
- the apparition of a god (PHASMA)
- the apparition of a dead person (PSYCHE)

In terms of general psychopathology, Phasma is a phenomenon that is at the opposite end of Phantasiai, the latter being clearly characterized by the exchange of experiences between different inter-related flesh-and-bone parties and by the retention of the phenomenon’s locus of control within a mundane order of reality. On the contrary Phasma, as divine intervention, is a perentory vision coming from outside. William James (1958 [1902]) and Ernesto De Martino (1978) underlined that Phasma performs the pragmatic function of solving a personal crisis, implying that the meta-historical horizon provided by divinity rectifies a moment of existential weakness. This weakness-redressing function in compliance with an extramundane code was highlighted by James, who found the onset of a religious peak experience to be corresponding to conflicts connected with the loss of personal agency.

### **WHY IS PHASMA PERSISTING?**

Once Phasma is accepted in social terms, not only it becomes a prevailing belief but also gets treasured by individuals’ neuronal network: «By the habitual act of thinking in a particular language, or believing in the forms of a particular religion, those thoughts assume a type of physical reality in the organization of neural networks in the brain» (Tseng, 2001).

As psychiatrists we should be concerned about this: if the intervention of a disembodied intentional Agency is accepted in social, cultural and neuronal level, then the divine becomes a field of neuroscience research.

### **AN EXAMPLE OF SYNCRETISM BETWEEN “MIRACLES” AND MASS MEDIA**

Let me illustrate you an example of how mass media forcibly deliver the standards to assess what we must be considering as a normal experience. In the article “A Syncretism Between Miraculous Healing and Mass Media” published in *Social theory & Health* (2004), Littlewood and I have examined the role of modern media (in this case in Italy) in bridging contemporary thaumaturgical healing and a certain recent trend within the so-called spiritual psychiatry. Here is the story: only a few days before the opening of the Roman Catholic Jubilee in 2000 (year during which Padre Pio was declared a saint by the Vatican) the national newspaper *IL MESSAGGERO* reported in

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its culture section a miraculous phenomenon that was unusual even compared to the Christian history of miracles. Literally:

[...] In 1933, the friar from Petralcina was bilocated in flesh and blood and appeared to Pope Ratti in the Vatican during an audience with Cardinals Siri and Gasparri. All three saw Padre Pio kneeling in front of the Pope. "Who showed him in?" asked Pius XI. The friar bent to kiss his hands and feet and told him: "Do not blame this friar". While he was leaving the room, the Pope told him "Here it is the finger of God". After two days, Cardinal Siri went to San Giovanni Rotondo and ascertained the fact that, on that miraculous day, the friar who had been in the Vatican was simultaneously witnessed to be in the village, praying with his fellow friars.

The article on Padre Pio's bilocation differs from other generic articles on canonical extraordinary events because it does not refer to a miraculous event or to an extraordinary healing performed on a crowd of farmers but to a vision of the Pope himself. Insofar as the vision was received by the head of a dominant Church, it cannot easily undergo a critical analysis due to the risk of being charged with offence to the State religion endorsed by norms and laws. The testimony of Padre Pio's apparition bilocating in the Vatican rooms comes from three leading personalities of the modern Vatican State, who witnessed it while being in a normal state of consciousness and engaged in normal acts of their daily life.

In the 21st century it is difficult to find a coherence between these levels of communication: on one side there are those compatible with the ordinary reality proposed by the scientific paradigm, on the other we have levels of representation of non-ordinary reality. The example of the bilocation miracle forces us to go back to the beginning of this presentation, because once a fictitious, virtual reality is built, the outcomes are uncertain from a psychopathological point of view. Dodds claimed that it is difficult to forecast the consequences of extramundane events because transcendence is «painless, free of even the "inconvenience" of the alarm signal of the loss of the Ego». I believe that cultural psychiatry has a duty to find out the thread explaining the variety of phenomena belonging to this post-modern era: cosmic religions, astrology, spiritism, neoshamanism, new age, millenarian movements, miracle-workers, thaumaturgical charisma are now everyday phenomena which deserve our attention.

## CONCLUSIONS

I think time has come to conclude this overview of mine about the destiny of Western imaginary. I would like to do this with a painting that I found during my stay in Balgo mission, in the Central Desert Region of Australia (fig. 1).

This painting was made using the pointillism technique, which implies dipping a needle-shaped tool in cans of colours and then dotting any available base, usually a bark. It represents at the same time: Aboriginal cosmogony, the Rainbow Serpent and the painter's personal Dreamtime. On the contrary, Western religious iconography is characterized by a clear-cut separation of space in three parts: the mortal earth, the sky as mediation and, perched high above all else, god himself, unreachable for the dramatic verticalization of the iconography. I invite you to consider how, in the aboriginal painting, the homogeneity of the figures displays no discontinuity between nature, life, gods. Moreover, I invite you to consider that such a unity of these three dimensions offers a great consistency to the Self.

I am sure that cultural psychiatry scholars will prove themselves able to impede the impoverishment of our dreamtime, namely the impoverishment of the solidity offered by the continuity of nature, life and gods.

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**FIG. 1**



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